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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Student Loan Corporation donates \$3 million for academies at Palmetto Priority Schools

COLUMBIA – The South Carolina Student Loan Corporation today announced a \$3 million donation to improve student academic programs for the state's 16 Palmetto Priority Schools. State Superintendent of Education Jim Rex said the funds will be used to establish a Star Academy program at each school to work with overage students who are at-risk of dropping out.

"This generous gift will allow us to help these students make up course work where they're behind and let them get back on track toward graduating from high school and becoming productive citizens," Rex said. He said Star Academy programs are now operating successfully at nine sites in eight school districts across the state, resulting in higher grades and fewer dropouts.

It was that initial success that attracted South Carolina Student Loan's interest in partnering with the State Department of Education, according to president Chuck Sanders.

"Our donation is part of SC Student Loan's on-going effort and mission to support education in the state of South Carolina," Sanders said. "We're pleased to offer our assistance to the Palmetto Priority Schools, and our hope is that the Star Academy will become a statewide model to help reduce the high school dropout rate."

A Star Academy functions as a school-within-a-school and takes students through an accelerated, rigorous course of study that enables them to complete eighth and ninth grade in one school year. Lessons are career-focused and tailored to the individual students' learning styles. Students are able to get extra help and study time, along with "coping skills" for success in their regular classroom setting.

The first Star Academy began in Pickens County in 2005 as a public/private partnership and expanded the next year. Most participants showed a more positive attitude toward learning, higher grades, better attendance and marked improvement in school behavior. Similar programs are now under way in Anderson School District Five, Richland School District One, Hampton School District Two, and in Greenville, Allendale, Charleston and Newberry counties as well as Pickens.

Rex said the 16 Palmetto Priority Schools must find new approaches to learning that will enable them to meet mandated student achievement goals and avoid possible state takeover. Their Star Academy programs may be able to begin as early as January 2008.

"When we created this collaboration back in April, it was obvious for these 16 schools that more of the same wouldn't work," Rex said. "They have a common malady of high poverty and low test scores. We've been looking for some preventive medicine, and I believe the Star Academy concept has the potential to be one remedy, thanks to this support from SC Student Loan."

SC Student Loan president Sanders said his agency in the past year has contributed \$3 million in scholarships for students attending the state's private and public colleges and universities, promoted financial literacy through the SC Jump\$tart Coalition, and provided support to Call Me MISTER, a program among 11 colleges in South Carolina designed to encourage African-American males to teach at the elementary school level.

The 16 Palmetto Priority schools are Ridgeland Middle School (Jasper County); Brentwood Middle School, Burke High School, North Charleston High School and Stall High School (Charleston County); Mt. Pleasant Middle School (Lee County); Whitlock Jr. High School (Spartanburg District 7); Johnson Middle School (Florence District 4); Estill Middle and Estill High schools (Hampton District 2); Alcorn Middle School, C.A. Johnson High, Eau Claire High, Gibbes Middle and W.A. Perry Middle schools (Richland District 1); and Allendale Middle School (Allendale County).

Their long-term collaboration entitles them to receive additional resources, including assistance from the state's higher education community; a team approach where they share and learn from each other; and the possibility of fewer regulations in order to simplify their management and reporting processes.